Addressing the Question of Authenticity in Middle Grades Student Voice Work: Wrestling with Politics, Power, and Purpose in Education

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Since the advent of principles and practices that gather under the umbrella of 'student voice,' questions have arisen repeatedly about whether particular approaches that claim the name incline toward the authentic or toward the contrived. Rightly so. These are questions that need to be asked again and again, and as several essays in this issue of *Middle Grades Review* make clear, the concept of authenticity itself also needs to be regularly interrogated. Generally, in the world of education, as in the world beyond it, concepts and practices are developed by adults with little or no attention to the experiences and perspectives of young people. Consistent with this tendency, authenticity in education is often thought of as residing within a particular (typically adult-generated) task, rather than comprising a judgment by a student of a task (Behizadeh, 2014). Key to contemporary student voice work is a shift from focusing solely on adult-generated concepts and practices of 'authentic' student voice to attending to the experiences and insights of students, taking seriously the deeper understandings that emerge at the intersection of these youth and adult perspectives and priorities, and engaging in collective action that such understandings inspire.

Over the last 20 years, there have been national, region-wide, and individual efforts to effect such a shift (Beattie, 2012; Cook-Sather, 2014a; Fielding, 2015; Serriere & Mitra, 2012; SpeakUp), particularly after the passage of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Lundy & Cook-Sather, forthcoming). And yet the politics of schooling writ large and of individual school contexts, the power discrepancies still typically structured into the student-teacher relationship, and the deeper, often unspoken assumptions about the purposes of education all make student voice work a fraught and complex, albeit potentially transformative, movement. To frame the articles included in this issue of *Middle Grades Review*, I briefly revisit perennial questions raised regarding the authenticity of student voice work, particularly those that highlight issues of politics, power, and purpose, and I then turn my attention to the various ways in which the articles in this issue address the question of authenticity.

Where Student Voice Intersects with Politics, Power, and Purpose in Education

An oft-repeated question about student voice work is an explicitly political one—a question of who influences and who is influenced. Posing this question about student voice work within schools, Arnot, McIntyre, Pedder, & Reay (2004) asked: "In the acoustic of the school whose voice gets listened to?" (quoted in Rudduck & Demetriou, 2003, p. 278). This phrase, "acoustic of the school," was coined by Bernstein (2000) to draw attention to what is audible in a particular context—what sound is produced and perceived—in the space of a school. In his words: "Whose voice is heard? Who is speaking? Who is hailed by this voice? For whom is it familiar?" (p. xxi). Questions of whose voice gets listened to are inextricably linked in student voice work to questions of whose voice is acted upon.

Such political questions are always informed by power dynamics (Cook-Sather, 2006); whether acknowledged or not, issues of voice "are embedded in historically located structures and relations of power" (Alcoff in Fielding, 2004, p. 300). As Alcoff continues: "'Who is speaking to

whom turns out to be as important for meaning and truth as what is said; in fact what is said turns out to change according to who is speaking and who is listening.'" Taylor and Robinson (2009) explore power as a significant factor in shaping both the philosophical underpinnings of student voice work and the practical assumptions that are made about what is possible through this work in the British context, where student voice as a recognized movement emerged under the leadership of the late Jean Rudduck.

Rudduck raised questions about authenticity from the beginning. In a recent tribute to her leadership and legacy, Fielding (2015) cited Rudduck and Flutter's (2004) highly influential work to remind us that student voice is "potentially an agent of radical change" only if "'the principles and values of pupil voice and participation are threaded through the daily interactions and communications of school life and reflect a coherent and widely supported set of values and principles' (p. 125)." It is on that "only" that questions of authenticity hinge, because to thread through daily lives in school the values and principles that underlie student voice work— "trust, respect and recognition, together with a sense of reciprocity and opportunities to exercise responsibility"(Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007, pp. 184-5)—is to change the standard weave of school culture. Driven by variously defined and increasingly high-stakes performance measures, schools are hard pressed to consider students' "experiences of education" (Rudduck, 1999, p. 10) or focus on "authentic learning" (Rudduck & Flutter, p. 62). Thus politics and power intersect with purposes of education, which are too often reduced to "an economically driven rat-race" (Fielding, 2015) in pursuit of schools as high-performance rather than person-centered organizations (Fielding, 2011).

Even when the principles and values of student voice are ostensibly taken up, the authenticity of the work can be threatened by what Rudduck and Fielding (2006) called 'the perils of popularity': the investment of agencies and the proliferation of websites and 'how to do it' resources that yield "'mile-wide' promotion with only 'inch thick'

understanding" (Rudduck, 2006, p. 113). Oversimplification of the issues involved in changing school culture to make it more responsive to students can lead—and has led—to tokenism, manipulation, and practices not matching rhetoric (Atweh & Burton, 1995; Fielding, 2004; Hopfenbeck, 2013; Lodge, 2005; Thomson & Gunter, 2005). Even well-intentioned student voice initiatives "can actually reinforce a hierarchy of power and privilege among students and undermine attempted reforms" (Silva, 2001, p. 98), and there will, necessarily, be gaps between teachers' and students' perspectives of student voice (Cheng, 2012). So how might we keep the question of authenticity front and center in student voice work?

It is essential that anyone engaged in student voice work critically analyze the politics in play, the way power dynamics between students and teachers (and administrators and researchers) play out in that work, and what the underlying assumptions about the purpose of education are. An approach that addresses all of these questions is the movement away from speaking *about* and *for* students toward a more dialogic alternative of speaking *with* them (Cook-Sather, 2012; Fielding, 2004; Fine, Torre, Burns, & Payne, 2007). Country- and province-wide projects in the United Kingdom (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007) and Canada (Levin, 2000; SpeakUp (n.d.)) are joined by individual efforts in Australia (Holdsworth, 2012), New Zealand (Kane & Maw, 2005), Greece (Mitsoni, 2006), and elsewhere to examine education, publish perspectives and findings, and make change with students. Even in the United States, where the Convention on the Rights of the Child has not been ratified, there are occasional examples of efforts to distribute school leadership (Brasof, 2015) and effect school reform (Beattie, 2012; Mitra, 2008; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009) in ways that strive for authentic partnership with students.

The student voice movement is gaining momentum, and as it does, it is critical that we continue to ask both the larger questions about politics, power, and purpose and the particular

question about authenticity that this issue of *Middle Grades Review* takes up. Whose voice gets listened to and whose voice is acted upon in the various arenas—curriculum, instruction, and assessment—within which power struggles get played out (Brasof, 2015; Earle & Kruse, 1999)? In what ways might we reconceptualize power relationships between and among students and educators such that trust, respect, recognition, and a sense of shared responsibility for teaching and learning come to inform school cultures? How can we strive for a kind of authenticity that is defined by young people's as well as adults' priorities? These are and should continue to be questions perennially posed by and through student voice work. Using one of the key insights I have gained through my own work with student voice and student-teacher partnerships in secondary teacher preparation and college faculty development, I turn now to a detailed consideration of how the articles in this issue address the question of authenticity in student voice and add to this growing body of work.

Multiple Perspectives and Multiple Ways of Addressing the Question of Authenticity

One of the most important insights I have gained through my work is that there is rarely, if ever, a single "right" or "true" perspective. This is perhaps an obvious point and one that can be embraced in the abstract without understanding its power until that power is unleashed. When multiple perspectives, each of which yields one—or more—angles of vision, are brought together, there is a greater likelihood of perspective in both the literal and the metaphorical senses: informed, multidimensional understanding (Cook-Sather, 2014c). Emily Nelson (this volume) makes this point in her essay, "Student Voice As Regimes of Truth: Troubling Authenticity," and she argues for "a socially constructed view of authenticity [that] foregrounds issues of power embedded within the 'machinery' of empowerment and promotes a contingent and reflexive approach to student voice."

Tracing the evolution of the authenticity notion in student voice work, Nelson illuminates the constant tension between ideals articulated and realities enacted—between the aspiration to "get it right" and unleash 'authentic' student voice and the issues of politics, power dynamics, and purposes of education that complicate such ideals. She insists that we keep in mind the paradox according to which the discourses that set up and introduce practitioners and academics to possibilities in student voice work also potentially constrain thinking. She offers the "student voice as regimes of truth" concept to "help us to engage with these shifting power relations by placing the student voice discourses under a reflexive analytic gaze," and she then puts some of her own student voice research under just such a reflexive analytic gaze.

Nelson's findings highlight the complexity of student voice work that all the essays in this issue illuminate. While embracing a commitment to "'purposefully empower[ing] young adolescents'" to assume an active role in their education and a concept of student voice as "students and teachers participating in 'hands-joined activities, ones that teachers and students work together in developing'" (National Middle Schooling Association, 2010, p. 16, quoted in Nelson) would seem a step away from the traditional politics, power dynamics, and purposes of schooling, paradoxes remain. For instance, Nelson found that "collapsing the student/teacher hierarchy as a way of elevating student status, in practice worked against developing the kind of influence students were seeking," which was more peer to peer. This difference between adult and student priorities and perspectives leads us back to the theme of multiplicity and the necessity not only of bringing together multiple perspectives but also of recognizing that each perspective is itself informed in multiple ways.

The larger questions regarding authenticity that Nelson raises are addressed in multiple ways in the two articles in this issue focused on students' experiences of and perspectives on literacy practices in relation to those students' identities and learning in language arts classrooms. Both of these articles address the question of authenticity of student voice at the intersection of a particular

theoretical framework, educational context, and focus within student voice work. They both illuminate the complexities and constraints of student voice work in schools, offer detailed representations of students' experiences and perspectives, and raise questions and offer examples of actions adults and youth might take respectively and together.

In "Cultural Capital, Agency, and Voice: Literacy Practices of Middle School English Language Learners," Bogum Yoon (this volume) explores the interconnection among two sixth-grade Russian English language learners' agency, identity, and classroom dynamics for their language and literacy learning in a middle school classroom in the United States. In keeping with the theme of multiplicity surfaced in Nelson's discussion, Yoon found that despite the students' similar backgrounds in terms of race, native language, age, gender, and length of stay in the US, there were striking differences in their literacy practice participation. Although she does not use the "student voice as regimes of truth" concept, there is a parallel here regarding the danger of making assumptions about monolithic experiences of seemingly similar students.

Using Bourdieu's (1977a & b; 1984; 1986) cultural capital theory as a conceptual framework, Yoon explores how classroom contexts allow these two middle-grade English language learners (ELL) "to use their primary language and culture," and she examines how "these contexts influence the way ELLs construct voices and position themselves." Like a particular discourse within Foucault's theory of regimes of truth, the work of Albright and Luke (2008) and Lareau and Horvat (1999) support Yoon in suggesting that cultural capital theory can be seen as "deterministic" and "does not pay particular attention to individual interactions and agency." Yoon includes a focused discussion of agency to counterbalance this inattention in Bourdieu's work. Just as student voice itself is co-constructed, Yoon argues that "cultural capital is not only acquired or possessed, it can be constructed, created, and activated by ELLs according to various contexts." Yoon emphasizes that "the factors that influence the

ELLs' participation in literacy practices are complicated and cannot be explained with one single feature." As she explains, her study suggests that "classroom dynamics might affect the ELLs' voices, participatory behaviors, and their positioning of themselves as passive or active."

Yoon's essay offers a vivid example of the way that politics, power, and purposes of education are always at play, and how they intersect in complex ways with the multi-dimensional identities of students. She illuminates how practices in which teachers engage can invite or hinder students' use of their languages and cultural references as cultural capital and how these opportunities or lack thereof affect students' identity development. She also illuminates the ways in which peers affect ELL students' engagement and development. In her discussion, Yoon argues that "classroom dynamics that focus on culturally inclusive or non-inclusive pedagogy are important aspects that middle school educators should consider on the development of student agency and engagement." Such consideration could certainly contribute to changing the standard dynamics of classrooms and the standard weave of school culture.

The second article that focuses on students' experiences within classrooms is "Authentic for Whom?: An Interview Study of Desired Writing Practices for African American Adolescent Learners." In this article, Gholnecsar E. Muhammad and Nadia Behizadeh (this volume) approach the question of authenticity from several angles: they ask what constitutes an authentic writing assignment, they seek to understand how African American adolescents describe their classroom writing experiences, and they analyze what factors African American adolescents desire related to authenticity for writing instruction. Many of the most desired aspects—expression, personal connections, sharing with peers, sharing with teachers, structured writing, student and teacher choice of topics—resonate with the quality of experience that students articulate in the other studies included in this issue. The focus is on engagement

and relationships, on the human dimension of learning, on being perceived as a person with a legitimate and, indeed, important perspective. As Jasmine, a 13-year-old African American girl in this study, put it: "If you won't listen to me when I speak, how about I write something down and make it beautiful and fluent and just powerful. And then you will pay attention to me and what I actually have to say."

Listening to what students say matters to them and acting on what they hear, Muhammad and Behizadeh not only strive to support authenticity in student voice, they also expand the response to the question, "In the acoustic of the school whose voice gets listened to?" As they point out, "student conceptions of authenticity in writing classrooms are overlooked when it comes to informing curriculum and policy decisions and are not widely reported in large-scale assessments. Moreover, the purposes for writing that African Americans held historically are largely absent from the ways writing is privileged in language arts classrooms and within assessments." In a study of a diverse body of eighth-grade students over two years, Behizadeh (2014) found that students articulated the importance of structured choice of valued topic, freedom over structure, writing for impact, and sharing final products and in-process work with others. In the study they report on in this issue, the authors compare these four to the themes derived from interviews of Black/African American students. Drawing on the students' own words, on the work of Geneva Gay (2010) regarding the importance of using students' cultural resources and perspectives as a conduit for improving and advancing teaching practices, and on the work of Muhammad (2015b) and Winn and Johnson (2011), Muhammad and Behizadeh argue for culturally responsive writing pedagogy that calls for teachers to find the intersections of students' histories, identities, and literacies.

Drawing on Splitter's (2009) definition of relevance, Muhammad and Behizadeh assert that "to be authentic, the writing task must connect to the lives of the youth." This definition of authenticity resonates with Rudduck and Flutter's

(2004) call for "authentic learning." And it applies not only to writing but also to all aspects of students' schooling. Their "framing of educational authenticity as residing within a student's perceptions rather than a task" that is conceptualized and required by others necessitates engagement in authentic student voice work: asking students what they experience and think, trusting and respecting what they say, and then working with them to understand how to make change given the politics, power structures, and purposes of education as they encounter those. Within writing pedagogy, it is often the case that "'the teacher does all the composing, and students are left only to fill in missing information'" (Applebee & Langer, 2011, p. 26, as quoted in Muhammad & Behizadeh, this volume). So too for much of education. It is this structured power asymmetry and pedagogical practice that student voice work aims to change.

The final article in this issue widens the scope to explore what happens when student voice informs school-wide initiatives and how authenticity plays out under those circumstances. In "Implementing Middle School Youth-Adult Partnerships: A Study of Two Programs Focused on Social Change," Cat Biddle and Dana Mitra (this volume) argue that youth-adult partnerships position youth and adults in roles of equal leadership of initiatives in their schools and communities and can "disrupt traditional relationships between young people and adults by working from an assumption of youth capability and agency, rather than passivity, and the value of young people's ideas and leadership." In their study of UP for Learning's Great Expectations and Getting to Y programs, both originally designed for high schools in Vermont but adapted for middle schools, Biddle and Mitra were interested both in how youth-adult partnership practices affect positive youth development of middle grades students and in the extent to which youth-adult partnerships at the middle grade level are able to position youth as social and school change agents. Both programs position students as partners with adults in working to change expectations, in the first case regarding expectations for learners in schools and

in the second case regarding school and community health.

This study takes on directly the political, power, and purpose questions of student voice work. Echoing Rudduck and McIntyre's (2007) list of the values and principles that underlie student voice work, Biddle and Mitra draw on what they call the "ABCDE"s of youth development: agency, belonging, competence, discourse and efficacy (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Like Nelson, they identified differences in the ways that students and adults perceived the youth-adult partnership programs in a middle school context. In their case, youth participants perceived positive developmental outcomes as a result of their participation, whereas adults observed difficulties in supporting the implementation of these initiatives when the goal was cultural or social change. As they explain: "While youth generally reported that their participation in the Getting to Y and Great Expectations programs had led to the development of some new skills and abilities, some adults partnering with youth in these programs remained skeptical about the readiness of school structures to support youth in translating this development into school-wide or community change."

Even through programs that successfully enact an alternative to the student-faculty power dynamics, the politics and dominant practices within schools can prevent culture change. As Biddle and Mitra put it: "The comparison of these two cases improves our understanding of how middle grades student voice and youth-adult partnership practices are both enabled and limited by existing structures of expectations about youth leadership in middle grade schools." Beyond this basic difficulty, though, Biddle and Mitra highlight a paradox: "The importance of student voice for drawing attention to entrenched injustices or community silence on an issue (as in the case of suicide or ability), but also the lack of resources and time available within middle school structures, even those supportive of student voice, to support youth-led efforts to address injustice."

Concluding Thoughts

Student voice work asks us to accept the importance of bringing together different angles of vision born of different positions that, at their intersection, yield perspective that can catalyze insight and inform action. Both practically and metaphorically, as well as politically, this evocation and juxtaposition of perspectives, particularly those that have been ignored or underrepresented in schools, is the goal of student voice work that strives for authenticity. But as the essays in this collection make clear, approaches to seeking, sharing, learning from, and acting on student voices must constantly question the ways in which those approaches intersect with politics, power, and purpose in education. The essays in this issue of *Middle Grades Review* reveal the ways in which the homogeneity of (also socially constructed) dominant cultures works against student voice efforts that demand acceptance and indeed pursuit of complexity and multiplicity. To realize the potential of student voice as a radical agent of change, 'voice' is not enough, as Lundy (2007) argued, unless it is understood as the sound, presence, and power of students alongside adults (Cook-Sather, 2006). The journey toward authenticity in student voice work—and if these essays consistently send one message, it is that this is an ongoing journey—requires interrogation of the term 'authenticity' itself, vigilance against the ways that dominant perspectives and practices reassert themselves, and persistence of both adults and young people in co-creating a world in which "with" is a reality, not only an ideal. ❖

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